

Hall's Corner: The Little Rotary That Could

By R. ELLIOTT ANDERSON

Some compare Hall's Corner to bumper-car, the amusement park ride where everybody bumps midget cars into everybody else. But the analogy doesn't fit because the rule governing the five-street intersection is just the opposite. It's: "I don't bump you and you don't bump me, even though it seems impossible that we don't bump each other." So bumper-car turns into Hall's Corner minuet, making it one of the safest rides in Duxbury.

Town police officers that have been on the local force for as long as 15 years scratch their heads to remember an accident in the Hall's Corner intersection. The computer tracking system installed at the Duxbury Police Department in 1994 spits out only one intersection accident reported since the inception of the system. So, if you have been following a circuitous route to the A&P or post office in order to avoid Hall's Corner, thus increasing your sense of safety, well, think again. In the same 1994 to present time period, 19 accidents have been reported in the A&P parking lot, according to Duxbury Police Safety Officer Cully Rossi.

Okay, maybe there aren't a lot of accidents at Hall's Corner, there sure must be a lot of complaints about the place. Sorry Charlie. Highway Traffic Committee Chairman Joe Shea says he gets one, sometimes two calls a year complaining about traffic safety at Hall's Corner. In the nine years he has been on the Safety Committee, he figures that's at most 18 complaints.

In many ways Hall's Corner could be called "The Little Rotary that Could." But it can't. Simply because it isn't a rotary, at least not legally. More about this anomaly later, but first: How did it ever get the way it is?

The place name derives from a house built by Captain David Hall around 1810, that became Hall's Tavern, it was located where the Exxon Station is today. Hall's Tavern was literally hauled away, piece by piece,

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Halls Corner: The Little Rotary That Could, legally is not even considered a rotary.

in 1930 after an enterprising Harvard Business School professor purchased it and reassembled it as a private home in Cambridge, where it still stands today. A true Federal beauty, and a loss to Duxbury's Federal collection of Captain's homes.

Back when Duxbury was Duxborough Town the early Hall's Corner was an ordinary intersection and remained that way for a long time, but even then the area was still at the commercial heart of the town. But Duxborough's town center revolved around the Meeting House and the Old Burying Ground in the vicinity of Pilgrim-By-Way and the current Chestnut St., according to Dorothy Wentworth's historical research. All roads, then, led to the Meeting House. The stocks, whipping post and pillory were located thereabouts, and some still feel it wouldn't be a bad idea to have them in the center of Hall's Corner today, although there isn't much room to do them justice.

The quirk present day five-road intersection emerged in the early 1800's. Five roads were shown intersecting on the Duxbury map of 1857 and when Captain Hall built his tavern in 1810 the junction was even then something of a business center. But the present configuration of Hall's Corner with the flag pole in the middle took shape about 75 years ago. Originally, the flag pole was a wooden ship's mast, however, the mast rotted over time and was replaced with a metal replica that stands in the center of the intersection now.

The volume of traffic that flows through Hall's Corner is variable, depending on the time of day, and not as much an issue as the geometry of the place. Besides the five roads intersecting, there are several driveways in the immediate vicinity, parking places practically surround the intersection, many requiring vehicles to back into the roundabout and the streets leading into the intersection. Let's face it, only New England could generate this type of misfunction junction and make it work and call it colorful.

To enhance the confusion, Hall's Corner is not classified as a legal "rotary," therefore rotary laws don't apply, such as vehicles turning in the rotary having the right-of-way. Also, a considerable part of the pavement in the intersection is privately owned; the parking spaces surrounding the Corner Store area and those in front of Dunkin' Donuts, and on around the stop sign of Depot St. do not belong to the town. In fact, the stop sign on Depot St. is on private property. Since these parking areas are private, the town does not plow them in winter or take responsibility for cleaning the litter around the retail establishments.

The real fun begins when semi-trailer trucks negotiate the intersection. They can't bend around the tight circle, so they have to cut across the roundabout, ignoring the directional signs. Drivers (usually out-of-towners) that do not understand the drill at Hall's Corner do this also, at everybody's peril. Large delivery trucks frequently straddle the intersection clogging the narrow turning area.

Wally Tonaszuck, director of Public Works, says the DPW hasn't been able to come up with any better configuration given the space available. Brick sidewalks and curbing were added to the area to spiff it up and DPW would like to build a more attractive island in the center, but hasn't figured out how to fit it in given the limited amount of turning space. According to Tonaszuck, "It's a situation with lots of faults and no good answers, but it looks worse than it is." The intersection does not make the list of the top five traffic trouble spots around Duxbury.

So if it's not a rotary, and right-of-way laws don't apply, what are the rules of the game? Obviously, stop signs at Bay Rd., Depot St., Washington and Standish mean just that: Stop. But any casual observer can watch these signs "rolled" as a matter of course, especially the sign on Standish, because vehicles pass by the sign and protrude into the intersection to see around parked cars, which are known to be creatively situated beyond the available parking spaces. This phenomenon can intimidate drivers already in the roundabout because it looks like Standish St. vehicles are barreling ahead, and sometimes they are. It's a

guessing game.

Speaking of stop signs, the only reason there is no sign on Chestnut St. is because it would have to be placed on the aforesaid private parking area. Stop signs must be on the right side of the driver and taking the required space would reduce the scarce parking available and awkwardly plant the sign way out there by itself. Sometime back the selectmen approved a stop sign for Chestnut St., but to date none has been positioned in the private parking area. The upshot is, this technically results in a perceived right-of-way for cars entering the intersection, one that is not by design, but merely the result of a kinder and gentler town government that has not taken the private parking space on Chestnut. Those who insist on asserting their "rights" entering Hall's Corner from Chestnut St. may want to contemplate the slim reed that supports their privileged position.

In terms of enforcement, Safety Officer Rossi says the only citation he remembers giving at Hall's Corner was a vehicle going the wrong way around the "rotary." Obviously against the rules. "Citations can be issued for failure to use caution entering an intersection," he says. And this caution is certainly a key factor governing the minuet at Hall's Corner.

When push comes to shove, so to speak, cynics claim Hall's Corner is a metaphor for the free market economy. The rules are largely *laissez-faire*, with the "Invisible Hand" of self-interest guiding traffic through the maze. Considering that Lincoln Navigators and such ilk cost about what a house used to cost, not too many years ago, drivers aren't interested in accelerating the rate of depreciation on their already depreciating investment by bashing a fender or tailgate. And when it comes to increasing insurance points, the bigger they are the harder they fall; therefore, caution prevails.

But most realize the factor required to successfully negotiate Hall's Corner is: Civility. It's a non-zero-sum game, win-win, not win-lose. Winning through intimidation invites trouble; the primary rule of courtesy, taking your turn, being tolerant toward the confused, not getting enflamed by the timid, participating graciously in a unique Duxbury driving experience, that could be a blood sport, but isn't.

So you have mastered Hall's Corner? Now you are ready for the other flag pole at Washington St. and St. George. If you are going down Washington St. and want to go left up St. George, do you swing around the flag pole, like at Hall's Corner? Well, no. The rule at this pole is to cut inside to make that left turn. And if you are coming down St. George and want to go left to Powder Point Ave., you move to the left lane, you don't stay to the right and swing left around the flag pole. Simple isn't it? Except for one thing. It's really sort of optional. How's that for *laissez-faire* all over again?